

# POWERFUL PA FOR AIRLINE PILOTS

by Jane Trembath

Many pilots speak reluctantly on the PA or sneakily try to avoid it altogether, because it is a mysterious element of airline operation that poses one of the greatest fears to pilots. But when used properly and effectively, PA projects your airline's image and establishes the leadership of the flight for safety.

## Why is the PA important?

The PA is the only means passengers have to form an impression of you, since they cannot see you stuck away in the cockpit.

The PA establishes the crew as authority. As the Captain or First Officer, you are in charge of the flight and should come across as being stable, authoritative and in command. Should there subsequently be an emergency, you have already established yourself as the leader and passengers will pay attention to your instructions. Therefore routine PA has an indirect safety element as well.

Good announcements make the passenger's flying experience better. We don't realise that many of our passengers are nervous, and good communication from the flight deck can reassure them. It is a positive interaction with all passengers on board.

International airline quality awards (eg. Skytrax) take into account the quality of the airline's PA, so it can even affect your airline's rating or win them an award.

## How to speak

The clarity and tone of your voice is more important than your words. Your tone should project both professionalism and friendliness.

### 1. Clarity

- Use the dedicated PA handset, as the optimum volume has been set by the technicians. The direct audio control panel PA can be loud and over-modulated.
- Hold the handset about 2cm from your mouth. Too close to your lips it causes over-modulation, and too far it will not pick you up loudly enough.
- Speak loudly and clearly. Enunciate your words and don't mumble. Take a deep breath before speaking.
- Speak slowly. It may feel unnatural, but the listeners (especially non-English speakers) need time to hear it over the speaker and process what you are saying.
- Put emphasis on important points and pause between phrases.

Tips: Listen to radio broadcasters for their volume, tone, inflection, and speed of delivery.

Watch for ahs and ums. They come from thinking while you speak, so prepare what you are going to say. Ask your fellow crew member to count the number of times you say ah and um during your announcement.

### 2. Confidence

A confident tone inspires passengers that you sound like you know what you are doing. Passengers may be stressed or not particularly enjoy flying, so they want to feel reassured that you sound like you are in control.

- Introduce yourself properly, by your position and your name, to project an image of who is speaking. "This is the Captain/First Officer speaking, my name is ...."

- N.B. the Captain, not *your* Captain. This conveys more authority.
- If you have a high-pitched voice, lower your tone.
  - Avoid upspeak – the pitch rising at the end of the sentence, which sounds as if you are asking a question? projects you are unsure about what you are saying?
  - Word your announcement professionally. Don't try to sound cool, laid-back or funny which will project that you don't take your job seriously.

### 3. Warmth and friendliness

Passengers will sense that you are uninterested in talking to them if you sound sing-song or monotonous (even if out of nervousness) or, even worse, sound condescending or talking down (Sky God).

- Put expression into your voice
- Smile as you talk, it will come through in your voice.
- Use appropriate language
  - "This is the Captain/First Officer speaking, my name is Joe Soap" is better than "This is Captain/First Officer Soap".
  - "It is our pleasure to fly you today" is better than "You are lucky to have us as your crew today" (condescending).
- Speak sincerely

Tip: If you can speak a language of passengers on board, they will appreciate a few words in their language.



### What to say

The content of your PA is personal, so develop your own. Think of the message you are trying to convey. Keep it concise, accurate, interesting and friendly. Use common sense, be thoughtful, and be yourself.

- Who is your audience?
  - On a 6am Monday flight to Cape Town, your aircraft is full of business people. They are a completely different audience than holiday makers enroute to Mauritius. Tailor your flight deck announcements to the audience and time of day.
- What message do you want to get across?
  - How will you structure your words? What **MUST** you say and what would be **NICE** to know as a passenger.
- What do your passengers actually want to know?
  - What they might be interested in – taxi, wait and flight time.
  - Example of an airline's Flight Ops Manual suggestion:
    - *The planned route of flight;*
    - *Cruising altitude, speed and OAT;*
    - *The expected flight time;*
    - *Possibly some technical details (takeoff mass, fuel on board);*
    - *Prior to landing: the local time and the weather at destination*
- What is interesting to tell them?
  - Anything unusual on departure or arrival at the airport or the day, e.g., "we will turn right immediately after departure, which is normal here in New York"

## When to speak and how long

Keep routine announcements short and appropriate to the time of day.

- Welcome announcement (by the Captain) once the passengers are on board
- Top of climb, or at the latest during the meal service, as many passengers want to sleep or watch movies.
- Just before top of descent, when the cabin crew will be waking them.
- Thank you and goodbye taxiing in.

Other times might be just before takeoff in the event of an unusually long taxi, or if there is something interesting to see during the cruise.

If it is a late departure from an airport, rather give a longer announcement on the ground and tell them you will speak to them again at top of descent.

From the internet....

*The best announcement for a late flight JFK-FRA that I ever heard was something like "welcome Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain. Welcome on board. I am sure you will appreciate that it looks like we are on time and while we will have to wait a bit before takeoff, we will get out of here soon. I will not bore you with details - we will fly very fast and very high, and as of now, it looks like we will be on time for Frankfurt. Have a good night".*

## Write it down / practise

Write the key points, in order, to keep you going in case of distractions. This will prevent ums and ahs as you think about what to say next.

Practise standard announcements out loud at home. Just because you think it fluently, does not mean that it will come out of your mouth that way.

Like everything else, it is a learning process. The content will evolve as your experience does.

## Jargon

Avoid jargon, technical terms and abbreviations – eg.

“our APU is inop so we'll use a Copco and GPU to start”

“ATC will give us a new slot”

“waiting for the trim clerk to bring the loadsheet”

“The temp is xyz, dew point is abc, we are expected to hold over this VOR at x thousand feet”.

## **Avoid these clichés!**

“Sit back and relax”

“This is your captain”

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls”

“The safest part of your journey is now over”

Use layman's terms and words that will be easily understood by all of the passengers. Balance what will be clear, whilst being accurate and not patronising.

## Explaining non-normal events

Speak in generalities emphasizing safety and include a resolution and time frame. Use vocabulary that will best convey your message in a firm, confident manner.

The NITS briefing comes in handy as an easily remembered formula:

1. Nature: Explain honestly but in easily understood terms what the problem is. Use generalities instead of specific technical terms – eg. malfunction instead of failure or fire, and avoid the word emergency.
2. Intention: How you and the airline are doing your best to resolve it, how you expect it to be resolved, and that it is in the interests of their safety.
3. Time: Give the anticipated time frame.
4. Special instructions: Any other instructions or plan “Follow the cabin crew's instructions” “we will provide more information at xxx time”. This gives the passengers something else to focus on apart from the non-normal.

Emphasize safety and focus the subject and the attention back on the passenger and away from the non-routine event they just experienced “in the interests of your safety.” In the process you have placed them back in the 'spotlight' rather than the go-around.

Be honest. Keep your passengers informed with as much truth as possible (whilst also remembering there is at least one nervous flyer on board). If you lie to the passengers they will see through you.

Delays: Update passengers every 20 minutes to prevent them getting frustrated.

NB. US Air-Passenger Rights law requires updates at a maximum interval of 30 minutes, or the airline incurs a fine.

After a go-around: Give some thought as to what to say before you speak over the PA. Immediately after a go-around the workload is high and the level of stress. First of all relax and breathe. Speak without transmitting tension in your voice regardless of the reason for the go-around.

Example from the internet: Let's say you ended up hot and high, and went around.

*"Ladies and Gentlemen this is the captain speaking. During our approach and landing we monitor many important things such as height, airspeed, distance between ourselves and other traffic, changing weather and runway conditions.*

Jargon like "sink rate warning, windshear warning", inadequate spacing, exceeding cross wind limit (or any limitation) are not understood and will cause alarm. Use generalities.

*Whenever any one of those items is not to our liking we will discontinue the approach and return when we are confident that all of the safety parameters are met to our satisfaction.*  
No blame is assigned.

*Air traffic control is sequencing us in for landing again; I anticipate a completely normal landing in 10 minutes. We will have you safely on the ground shortly.*

Resolution: The unknown can generate anxiety, so preempt their anxiety and give them a time frame (10 minutes) and a successful conclusion; their "safe arrival".

Don't scare the pax

The choice of words matters. Wording your message negatively causes alarm when just a different vocabulary can sound reassuring instead. For example:

SCARY	REASSURING
Entering Turbulence	
<p><i>Please stay where you are, we are expecting some really bad weather ahead of us".</i></p> <p>You've just placed a 'negative' into the mind of the passenger by using the word 'Bad'.</p>	<p><i>We will soon be encountering some light/moderate turbulence which requires you to take your seats and ensure that you seat belt is securely fastened. We should be through it in 10 minutes."</i></p>
Emergency procedure	
<p><i>"Don't worry ladies and gents, we practice this regularly in the sim"</i></p> <p>This gives the impression that it happens often, and 'worry' places a further negative.</p>	<p><i>Rather say "We have trained for this particular event".</i></p>

### What never to say – inappropriate things

Some pilots say inappropriate things that confuse, annoy and upset the passengers. You may not know who is on your flight. Your passengers could include a multi-thousand hour pilot and attorney specializing in aviation litigation, a CAA inspector, or a senior executive of the airline.

#### A cringeworthy example

*Say you've just been informed by Ops that you must fly another two sectors today, do not welcome passengers with a PA telling them "we've been hijacked to fly you to X." Your words may be misconstrued!*

- Never make put-downs or sexist remarks about crew members or passengers, even if you think it is a joke.
- Never make negative remarks about your airline, no matter what you think they have done.
- Avoid out of place remarks about other airlines
- Never admit guilt, error, or unprofessional conduct.

*"On a recent flight from LGW, we were all treated to what can only be described as a rollocking from the Captain because he believed somebody had left their mobile phone on."*

### Be yourself

Maintain a delivery that you as an individual feel comfortable with, whilst bearing in mind the importance of maintaining your authority and dependability in the minds of those you are addressing.

The PA should be a communication that reflects your professional personality, based on your own assessment, experience, common sense, and choice of content.

*"If aircraft type allows, I occasionally make the odd PA from the front of the cabin if there are severe delays, or tech issues once pax have boarded. I have found that it really takes the heat off the cabin crew"*

*'One captain on our company B737 flying across the South Pacific and with nothing to be seen apart from the occasional desert island (atoll), often came up with:*

*"We are flying at 35,000 feet and apart from occasional slight turbulence the weather is fine for the flight. For those interested in geography, on our left wing tip far over the horizon is England 12,000 miles way. On the right at 2000 miles is Honolulu and if you love the snow, then the Antarctic is 4000 miles directly behind us on our tail!"*

### It's a learning process, and it's worth it

Ask for feedback from other pilots and the cabin crew. Listen to your colleagues when they use the PA. You will develop your own style and content.

Then, you will be rewarded by a connection with your passengers, who may be inspired to pop their heads into the flight deck and thank you for a wonderful flight. Happy talking!

Watch the Youtube video at <https://youtu.be/BzZjA3LBuyg>